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Incidents of espionage inundate Britain

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London—Nunn May, Fuchs, Pontecorvo, Maclean, Burgess, Philby, Anthony Blunt, Finney, Lonsdale, the Krogers, Ethel Gee, Henry Houghton, George Blake, Vassall, Bossard, Britten, Prager, Hinchcliffe, Bingham, Geoffrey Prime.

Atomic scientists, diplomats, military officers, linguists, clerks. Some are notorious, such as Kim Philby and Klaus Fuchs, and others are obscure, but all are Soviet spies pried out of the British establishment since 1946.

Whether they acted because of conviction, greed, sex, blackmail or even ambition, all of them damaged Britain's security to some degree, and to an even greater degree its intelligence relations with its allies, particularly the United States.

"At least we put our spies on trial ...." a senior British official said when asked about the continuing saga of Soviet cloak-and-dagger penetration of apparently ever-vulnerable Britain.

Yesterday Hugh Hambleton, 60, an Anglo-Canadian one-time NATO economics expert, admitted during cross-examination at his trial at the Old Bailey, central criminal court, that he had been a Russian spy inside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Last week he had persisted that he actually was a double agent, working for Canada and France against the Soviets, and that he had never spied against Britain or Canada. During a 30-year period he is alleged to have been a major Soviet agent and passed "thousands" of documents to Moscow.

Sir Michael Havers, the attorney general, pressed Mr. Hambleton during hours of cross-examination. Mr. Hambleton admitted having "feelings of regret" about what he had done "while under pressure" from the Russians. "Then you were spying for the Russians, there is no other answer," said Sir Michael. "I suppose so," Mr. Hambleton replied, finally cracking his stream of denials.

Earlier last week Rhona Ritchie, 30, who was one of the rising young stars of the British diplomatic service, received a suspended nine-month sentence for passing diplomatic cables to her Egyptain lover while they were assigned to their Embassies in Tel Aviv.

Sir Michael, who prosecuted Miss Ritchie, told the court her "behavior was more foolish than wicked, but involved a sad breach of the trust in her by virtue of her appointment."

Also last week, a 20-year-old lance corporal in the intelligence corps was accused of "preparing" to turn over security documents to an unnamed person. Sources emphasized that he was apprehended before he could do anything, but because British laws about disclosure of information are so strict, nothing more will be learned about him before his trial.

Last Thursday Robin Gordon-Walker, son of the late Lord Gordon-Walker, a former foreign secretary, was charged with violating the official secrets act in his job as a diplomatic correspondent with the Central Office of Information. Sources said the case apparently stems from the "careless handling" of classified material, and not espionage.

The apparently endless stream of spy and security cases has provoked an increasingly acrimonious argument in British government, intelligence and security circles.

It led Sir Timothy Kitson, the senior Conservative who heads the House of Commons Defense Committee, to complain that the time had come for parliamentary examination of the highly sensitive question of "positive vetting," the British term for security checks.

"It seems as if we are discovering a spy a day," Sir Timothy said. "With such matters in so obvious a muddle, there is a case for looking at the whole background of positive vetting."

Positive vetting, which is designed to make the subject prove he is a good risk, has failed repeatedly, its most spectacular recent failure coming in the cases of Cmdr. Michael Trestrail, the queen's personal guard, who turned out to be a promiscuous homosexual, and Geoffrey A. Prime, who was vetted four times in a 14-year career as a Soviet spy.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, titular head of all security services, opposes parliamentary oversight of them on the grounds that new and tighter measures will be developed internally.

There is an increasingly better case, however, for major improvements in British security background investigations, which some critics have described recently as nothing more than a series of polite questions put to people the subject of the investigation has offered as references.

Many of the most notorious spies —Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, Alan Nunn May, George Blake and William Vassall—operated in the days before positive vetting was established.

Some of them—Mr. Philby, Mr. Blunt, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean in particular—were products of the upper-class "old boy network," recruited in pre-World War II university days when communism was fashionable and was seen in some circles as the only positive defense against the rise of fascism.

Over the weekend it was reported from Moscow that Mr. Maclean, 69, who defected to Moscow in 1951 with Mr. Burgess, another British diplomat, is near death in a Moscow hospital, suffering from cancer and pneumonia.

Mr. Philby, who fled to the Soviet Union in 1963 as British agents were closing in on him, still lives in Moscow as a senior intelligence officer in the KGB.

Mr. Burgess died in 1963 of heart disease.

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